

# Framework for the effective delivery of school psychological services



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## Introduction

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) is the peak professional association for psychologists in Australia, representing more than 17,500 members. A significant number of our members are school psychologists. This document provides clear guidelines for the delivery of effective school psychological services and has been written by the APS for school psychologists, their employers and policy makers within Australian government, Catholic and independent schools.

Throughout Australia, a range of titles are used to identify school psychologists. These titles include educational psychologist, school psychologist, guidance officer and school counsellor. Sometimes, the latter two titles are also used to identify individuals from other disciplines. However, within the psychology profession, psychologists working in schools providing psychological services to students are typically known as school psychologists.

Research shows that a significant proportion of school-aged Australian children and young people experience mental health problems. The latest and most comprehensive national research conducted by Sawyer et al. (2000) estimated that 14% (one in seven) had mental health problems in the year of testing – 1998. An even higher percentage of these young people also met the criteria for comorbidity, i.e., experience more than one mental health disorder at one time. Mental health disorders are known to adversely affect a child or adolescent's emotional wellbeing, social functioning and academic achievement. The need for specialised psychological intervention and support for children and adolescents is indisputable – especially within schools.

This document informs those working in education about the role of school psychologists. It provides information to both employers and practitioners about the effective delivery of school psychological services, which can only occur if it is fully supported and valued by the whole school community. The document advocates common practice standards that should be met by all school psychologists. It is hoped that this will promote a national and unified approach to the practice of school psychology in Australian schools.

This document also presents a model of school psychological service delivery, which is designed to encompass the many activities involved in the effective provision of psychological support of school populations. It can be used as a model of best practice to guide and inform State/Territory documents. It is recommended that this document is read in conjunction with the APS Code of Ethics (2007) and other APS resources related to the provision of psychological services to children and young people. It is also recommended that each education system or sector develop their own set of guidelines related to the provision of school psychological services in order to better reflect the unique requirements of their local school population and ethos.

### Role of the school psychologist

School psychologists can be found in all school sectors in a range of school settings, including preschools, primary schools, secondary schools and special schools. Some school psychologists, particularly those working in the government system, work for a number of schools covering a small or large geographical area, whilst others work in only one school. School psychologists can be found across Australia, in metropolitan, rural and remote locations.

School psychologists apply their psychological and educational expertise to support students to achieve academic success, psychological health, and social and emotional wellbeing. To achieve these outcomes, the activities that school psychologists engage in are diverse and include counselling, consultation, assessment, implementation of prevention and intervention programs, referral processes, evaluation and the management of critical incidents. School psychologists also provide information and psycho-education to student populations, school staff, departmental staff, parents/guardians and external stakeholders. School psychologists endeavour to work in a consultative, resourceful and supportive manner with parents/guardians, teachers, school administrators and external health service providers. School psychologists always work with the primary purpose of achieving the best outcome for students.

## Section One:

# Qualifications, skills and ethical obligations of school psychologists

## School psychologist qualifications

To use the title 'psychologist' in Australia, a person is legally required to be registered with the appropriate Psychologists Registration Board in the State or Territory in which he or she is practising to ensure they meet specified standards of competence and ethical practice (from July 2010 a national registration board will come into effect). Registration as a psychologist involves a minimum of six years training prior to gaining full registration. As a minimum, psychologists must complete a four-year degree in psychology and undertake two years supervision as a probationary psychologist prior to becoming a fully registered psychologist. Many psychologists, however, complete a Masters or Doctorate degree, consisting of coursework and research and placements, following their initial degree to become a fully registered psychologist.

Once registered, psychologists wanting to work as school psychologists can apply for positions advertised by schools, regions/districts and central offices of Education Departments. Some State/Territory Education Departments may also require a teaching degree in addition to psychology qualifications. In most States/Territories a background check or a prescribed notice is needed before work can commence with children and young people. There is also provision for probationary-registered psychologists (sometimes referred to as intern psychologists or provisional psychologists) to work in schools in positions under the supervision of a fully registered and experienced school psychologist. Each State/Territory has rules and regulations provided by the Registration Board that stipulate the limitations of probationary or intern psychologists under supervision.

As an obligation of registration, practising psychologists must follow strict guidelines for professional conduct that cover ethical responsibilities and confidentiality. Ethical codes have been developed by the APS and State/Territory Psychologist Registration Boards to safeguard the welfare of recipients of psychological services and to protect the integrity of the psychology profession.

## School psychologist skills

Psychologists are experts in human behaviour, having studied the brain, memory, learning, human development and the processes that determine how people think, feel, behave and react. Psychologists apply their expertise using valid, reliable and scientifically supported methods. Psychologists also have knowledge and skills in research design and statistical analysis which enables them to direct or be involved in the development of research projects and the evaluation of outcome data, such as the effectiveness of prevention programs and intervention strategies.

In order to support students to achieve academic success, psychological health, and social and emotional wellbeing, school psychologists have expertise in the following areas:

- Understanding the complexities of child and adolescent development and the difficulties that may be experienced by students at various stages.
- Understanding how adverse family, personal and/or peer experiences can affect students' academic, social and emotional functioning.
- Assessing and diagnosing developmental, learning and behavioural difficulties, and where appropriate, communicating the results of these assessments to key people, such as parents, teachers and government funding agencies.
- Identifying, assessing, and/or diagnosing mental health problems and providing follow-up treatment or referral to outside mental health services.
- Providing counselling and treatment for a range of problems affecting children and adolescents.

- Designing and evaluating effective prevention, treatment and support programs for individuals, groups and school populations.
- Understanding and conducting psychological research especially in areas related to school psychological practice.
- Providing expert advice relating to the management of critical incidents.
- Consulting with parents, teachers, school administrators, external health service providers and other members of the school community, with the primary purpose of achieving the best outcome for students.
- Evaluating the effectiveness and outcomes of professional practice and programs.

## Ethical obligations

Psychologists' professional conduct is guided by the APS Code of Ethics and the Codes of Conduct developed by State/Territory Psychologist Registration Boards. All psychologists have received extensive training in ethical practice. The APS Code of Ethics and State/Territory Codes of Conduct set clear parameters around psychologists' roles and activities, promoting safe, ethical and professional psychological practice, protecting both the integrity of the profession and the rights and safety of the public. There are, however, a number of ethical obligations that are particularly relevant to psychologists working in educational settings.

### ***Informed consent***

Prior to providing services, psychologists are required by law to inform clients about what to expect regarding the nature of the treatment/interaction. This should include the limits to confidentiality, rights of access to files, and to whom reports will be sent. For school psychologists, this may also include informing students in a clear and easily understandable way, the role of the psychologist in a school setting (i.e., as being entirely different to the role of teachers), the relationship between the psychologist and other members of the school setting (such as the principal and/or teachers), what information imparted by the student can or cannot be kept confidential, where and how psychological files are kept within the school or Department, the length of time that psychological files are kept, and who has access to the files.

It is the responsibility of the school psychologist to determine whether or not a young person is capable of understanding all the above issues and therefore possess the ability to give informed consent to receive the services of the school psychologist. There is no specified age at which a young person is deemed capable of giving informed consent. As part of the process of obtaining informed consent, a school psychologist should determine whether the young person:

- Can understand the nature of the proposed psychological service
- Can understand the benefits and risks of the proposed psychological service
- Can understand the consequences of receiving or not receiving the proposed psychological service
- Has the capacity to make an informed choice; and
- Can understand the limits to confidentiality.

A young person with a disability may be capable of giving informed consent if they are assessed as meeting the above criteria.

It is important that school psychologists keep in mind that a part of their role is to educate or inform students about the voluntary nature of counselling and on their rights within a counselling relationship. The student's experience of counselling within a school setting will most likely inform their future decisions to independently seek counselling for personal issues when they are older.

### **Parental consent**

Parental consent is an important issue to consider when providing psychological services to children and young people in school settings. Particularly for adolescents, the willingness of young people to seek psychological support may be inhibited if they need to get their parent's permission first before they speak to the school psychologist. Research on this topic reveals that young people highly value a confidential counselling service within schools and place much importance on their autonomy in seeking support from a school psychologist without the need for parental consent to do so. On the flipside, school administrators and parents may be apprehensive about students seeking psychological support without parent's knowledge. Sometimes this apprehension stems from a lack of understanding of the law around this issue, the rights of students and parents, the types of services that school psychologists provide and the role of confidentiality in a school setting.

In the primary school setting, it is generally recommended that the consent of the parent or carer be sought before a school psychologist assesses or provides psychological support to a child. However, if there is a concern for the immediate safety or wellbeing of a child, then the school psychologist must act in the child's best interest, which may override any need for parental consent prior to treatment. For older children and teenagers in secondary school, the requirement for parental consent varies between individual schools and State/Territory Education Department guidelines.

Some secondary schools believe it is the right of all their students, regardless of age, to confidentially speak with and seek support from the school psychologist without the need for formal parental consent prior to each new counselling relationship. Schools may provide an opportunity for the school psychologist to explain the counselling service to parents prior to their child's enrolment into year seven. In this situation, it is recommended that, on enrolment, parents sign a general consent form that allows their sons or daughters to freely access the service. This consent should last until the student exits the school at the end of Year 12. Parents should also be informed that, where possible, the school psychologist will endeavour to involve the parents in their child's psychological interventions, but only with the prior consent of the student. The APS Guidelines for Working with Young People (2009) would support this method of service provision; however, the school psychologist must first ascertain whether or not the young person has the maturity and ability to give informed consent before engaging their psychological services. If the student does not have the capacity to give informed consent then the school psychologist should first obtain the consent of people with legal authority to act on behalf of the young person (usually the parent) prior to any psychological intervention with that student. The school psychologist should attempt to obtain the young person's consent as far as practically possible.

Other schools, regardless of age, require formal individual parental consent prior to a student seeking support from the school psychologist. However, some schools set age limits where parental consent is no longer required. Regardless of how a school chooses to deal with this issue, it is strongly recommended that each school has a school psychological services policy, which includes a section on parental consent. The policy should be developed in consultation with the school psychologist, Principal and school council. A helpful resource to consider when developing a policy is the APS Guidelines for Working with Young People (2009). This document considers the APS Code of Ethics (2007), relevant APS Guidelines and various legislation that impact on this issue. The Guidelines are available to members from the APS website.

### **Confidentiality**

School psychologists are bound by law to maintain client confidentiality when collecting, recording, storing, disseminating, and disposing of information. However, not all information that a school psychologist collects can remain confidential. This is particularly true for information that reveals a risk of harm to the client or to any other person. Similarly, information that is requested under a court order must also be disclosed. These requests are often made when there is a family dispute over child custody, however, many other situations can result in a school psychologist's file being subpoenaed. It is important to note that it is possible and may be necessary for the school psychologist to make a request to the Court that some or all of the information contained in a psychological file should not be released because of the effect that this may have on the client. Further information about subpoenas is available from the APS website.

Special mention must be made about the nature of employment of psychologists working in schools. In contrast to those working in private practice, school psychologists should also be aware that their employer, be it the Principal or the Department, owns all psychological files. This means that files cannot be removed by the psychologist when they leave employment and are to be kept on school or Departmental premises. School psychologists should be mindful that in some special situations information contained in the files can be requested by their employer, whether that is the Principal or the Department. In all situations, however, the employer has a legal responsibility and duty of care to respect the confidential nature of the counselling relationship and a request to access a file should only be made within the confines of Privacy Legislation and State/Territory Health Records Legislation. It is very important that protocols around this issue are understood by all parties and are contained in a school counselling policy.

Students should be informed of the limits to confidentiality prior the beginning of a counselling relationship. If a school psychologist feels unsure about the confidentiality of certain information, or about requests for information by parents, teachers, school administrators or others, they should refer to their Code of Ethics, seek supervision with an experienced or senior school psychologist, and/or in some cases seek legal advice. The APS offers a Professional Advisory Service (PAS) for members and the public to assist psychologists and others with ethical and other queries. Psychologists and others can call or email PAS with their queries. The APS also has a team of employment specific advisors, including a Psychologists in Schools Advisor who, amongst other things, answers questions about professional issues affecting school psychologists. Both the PAS and advisory team are located at the APS national office.

### **Competence**

School psychologists are required to have a sound knowledge base that is inclusive of theoretical background, empirical research, and effective psychological strategies and techniques that complement educational achievement and social and emotional development of students. The Code of Ethics prescribes that school psychologists can only provide psychological services within the limits of their level of competence. In order to achieve this, school psychologists should seek professional supervision on a regular basis and consult with other professionals where necessary. If a student's issues are beyond the capacity of a school counselling service or a school psychologist's expertise then a referral should be made to a more appropriate mental health service.

### **Dual professions**

Sometimes, psychologists can be qualified as members of two or more professions. For school psychologists, this can be in both psychology and education. If a school psychologist attempts to work in both roles, i.e., as both the school psychologist (counselling, psychological assessment etc.) and classroom teacher, there is a strong risk of role confusion for both students and the psychologist. The role of teachers and school psychologists are intrinsically separate and ethical dilemmas involving dual professions and multiple relationships (i.e., where the psychologist is in a different professional relationship with the same client) are likely to occur when combining the two. The APS recommends that such situations should be avoided.

### **Conflict of interest**

School psychologists who are also engaged in independent private practice should be mindful of the conflict of interest that may result from this situation. The general concern is that school psychologists do not use their work at the school as a referral source for their independent work. State/Territory Education Departments and independent school employers may have policies regarding school employees engaged in private practice, and it is important to refer to these policies before combining the two. In some situations, school psychologists must formally apply to their employer before engaging in independent private practice. It is recommended that employers are informed of any private practice work that the psychologist is engaged in at the onset of employment at a school. Steps should then be taken to ensure that no conflict of interest occurs.



## Section Two:

### Delivery of school psychology services

A framework for conceptualising psychological services in schools identifies four main focus areas – direct service, indirect service, whole school service and systems service.

#### Direct service approach

The direct service approach involves the psychologist directly providing an assessment of a student's cognitive, academic, social-emotional and behavioural functioning. Direct service includes development, implementation and evaluation of individual and group interventions (i.e., counselling, behaviour modification and whole school programs) that address students' cognitive, social-emotional and behavioural problems. Additionally, school psychologists can assist with developing procedures and providing support to school community members during and following a critical incident.

#### ***Psychological and behavioural assessment***

Psychological assessment includes administration and interpretation of standardised tests that provide an objective assessment of an individual student. Testing includes, but is not restricted to, assessment of cognitive functioning, language development and skills, visual and auditory perception, motor skills, and social and emotional skills.

Behavioural assessment provides an assessment of a child's or adolescent's behaviour. This may be measured by observation of a student in a classroom environment, group setting, individual counselling session, psychological or educational assessment, or by consultation with teachers and/or parents.

Data and information from psychological and behavioural assessments provides direction for diagnosis, reporting and any follow up intervention that may be required. There are a number of tests that are restricted to administration by psychologists only. These tests are often required for funding applications for additional educational support for students with learning disabilities.

#### ***Educational assessment***

Educational assessment provides achievement measures that indicate what has been learned by a student in areas covered in the school curriculum and provides information that can assist with special programming for students. It is not uncommon to look at a student's psychological assessment and educational assessment results together in order to make sound recommendations for working with schools and families to assist the student.

#### ***Psychological treatment and counselling***

School psychologists are trained to provide treatment for mental health problems, behaviour problems, developmental issues and the impact of problematic life events that can affect children and adolescents. Treatment of referred students is aimed at helping them to better understand and manage their emotions and behaviour, apply more productive coping styles to daily events or stressors, and find achievement and satisfaction both at school and within their peer relationships and families. As part of the treatment approach, school psychologists may assist teachers and parents to understand the difficulties a student may be struggling with and provide ways of assisting the student at home and in the classroom. At times it is necessary for the school psychologist to discuss with a student, parent and possibly the teacher the need for referral to a specialist agency if the student's needs are outside the resources or expertise of the school psychologist.



## Indirect service approach

A significant part of school psychologists' role is to indirectly meet the needs of students by advising or consulting with teachers, parents and other stakeholders. Research shows that teachers and principals highly value the presence of psychologists in schools because of this function of their role.

Indirect service approach includes:

- Consultation with teachers to provide advice and information about general mental health and other psychological issues that affect students.
- Consultation with teachers to determine student programs, strategies and techniques, including educational, psychological intervention and prevention approaches.
- Parent information sessions that provide an understanding of child and adolescent development and issues that affect the mental health and wellbeing of students. Advice to parents on developmentally appropriate strategies and techniques that support children and adolescents' educational success and personal wellbeing is also given.
- Consultation with parents about their child's issues and chosen psychological interventions to deal with those issues (with the consent of the student and depending on age and maturity).
- Consultation with relevant school staff to address individual student and class behaviour, learning styles and/or difficulties. Advice on how to make appropriate changes to classroom management and the curriculum in order to meet the educational, developmental and or behavioural needs of a student is communicated.
- Development of a whole school approach to behaviour management and student psychological wellbeing.

## Whole school service approach

School psychologists provide psychological prevention, intervention and post-intervention practices to support whole school populations. There are a number of assessments that school psychologists administer and analyse that determine appropriate actions/strategies to assist students, parents and teachers with forward planning relating to academic, behavioural, emotional, psychological and social problems.

By providing expertise and support to school populations, school psychologists can assist schools with planning, preparation, implementation and evaluation of psychological and educational strategies. Practices such as provision of parent information sessions, implementation of bullying, anti-violence and personal safety programs and crisis intervention strategies, and referral to appropriate treatment programs are examples of services offered by school psychologists. While the school psychologist may only provide some of these services, she/he is able to offer recommendations for external supports and programs that may assist the school to achieve optimal success.

## Systems service approach

School psychologists can assist with the coordination of teachers, parents/carers, and external agencies such as mental health services, or social service organisations, to address the psychological needs of a student. They may assist with crisis management policy and practices that require developing relationships with emergency services personnel and mental health professionals. In addition, school psychologists provide response and recovery strategies when working with school community members following a critical incident. Furthermore, school psychologists can provide psychological advice and information to Government Departments or education sectors about policies that affect student populations and school psychological practice.

## Section Three:

### Requirements for effective professional practice in schools

To ensure effective professional practice in schools, there are a number of requirements for psychological service provision that need to be met. These requirements assist psychologists to provide effective services that protect both the rights of the students and the expectations of the school.

#### Definition of roles and responsibilities and the need for a school counselling policy

It is imperative that there is clarity around the roles and responsibilities of psychologists who are providing services to school communities. A school policy for psychological services dealing with issues such as roles and relationships in the school, how the services are accessed, and the level of confidentiality of student information will assist in providing this clarity. The types of services provided by a school psychologist will be dependent on a number of factors including the needs of a particular school population and/or the school psychologist's role as established with the region/district and/or school/s served by the psychologist. The policy should be easily accessible by all members of the school community.

#### Clarity regarding referral processes

Referral procedures may differ in schools, regions/districts and States/Territories depending on resources and relevant Education Department or school sector practices. Whether or not parental consent is required before referral to the school psychologist is usually dependent on the school policy around this matter. For psychologists working in a number of schools, the nominated school contact should discuss a potential referral with the school psychologist and a decision needs to be made about when the referral will become active. If parental consent is required, the school psychologist may set up a meeting with the parent/carer to obtain any further information in relation to the referral and provide an explanation of the process for working with the student in question. In all cases the reasons for the referral to the psychologist must be clearly recorded in the school psychologist's notes. For all communications regarding a student referral for counselling, psychologists are ethically bound to maintain client confidentiality.

#### Adequate record keeping and file storage facilities

School psychologists should make and keep accurate case notes as a record of psychological services provided to students and to guide their interventions with students. By law, client records must be retained for a minimum of seven years after a minor has reached maturity (e.g., 18 years plus seven) unless there is a legal requirement that directs otherwise. In the Northern Territory, files on indigenous children must be kept for life. School psychologists must protect the privacy and maintain the confidentiality of the client in relation to access, storage and disposal of client files subject to the legal requirements of employment conditions. The school psychologist's files should be stored separately from all other school or multidisciplinary team files and must be kept in a secure, locked cabinet, in a locked room – usually the school psychologist's office. A particular psychologist's client files are accessible by another school psychologist only when there is a professional need to know that information. The school psychologist's files are accessible under legal processes by subpoena, or through statutory obligations.

## Access to professional supervision

Regular professional supervision forms an important part of ensuring the competent delivery of school psychological services and contributes to the mental health of school psychologists themselves. Professional supervision provides the opportunity to confidentially discuss difficult ethical considerations with senior members of the psychology profession. Supervision provides an opportunity for school psychologists to build on skills and knowledge and helps in decision making regarding their work with psychologically vulnerable students, who may have complex issues. It is an essential aspect of ensuring quality of service delivery.

Where the staffing structures within an educational organisation do not allow for in-house supervision to occur, provision should be made for school psychologists to seek the services of an external psychological supervisor for professional support and development. This should be fully supported by the school Principal/employer and recognised as an integral part of the school psychologist's role. This means that supervision may occur during normal working hours and paid for by the employer. A register of suitably qualified supervisors of school psychologists for professional development purposes is available from the APS website ([www.psychology.org.au/prac\\_resources/schools/register/](http://www.psychology.org.au/prac_resources/schools/register/)).

## Opportunities for professional development

A further important aspect of ensuring quality of psychological services is to provide opportunities for school psychologists to engage in ongoing professional development to maintain up-to-date knowledge and skills. School psychologists should participate and engage in activities that maintain their expertise and further develop their professional skills and knowledge. This ensures that school psychologists are kept up to date on new psychological research and any current legislation applicable to their professional role.

School psychologists who are members of the Australian Psychological Society are required to accumulate 90 professional development points in activities over two-year cycles to maintain membership of the Society. It is anticipated that new national registration (from July 2010) will also involve mandatory professional development to maintain registration as a psychologist.

### ***School psychologist to student ratio***

Because of the many activities that school psychologists engage in, and the significant number of students seeking their services, many school psychologists report that they are unable to fulfil all the activities that may be demanded of them in the time available. A significant contributor to this issue is the student to psychologist ratio. A lower student to psychologist ratio means that more students receive the help that they need for their issues – sooner rather than later. It also means that school psychologists are able to fulfil a greater variety of activities – such as, for example, assessment, counselling, group work, parenting sessions and consultation with teachers. Psychologists also do not feel rushed or time pressured in their attempt to give high quality psychological support to students in need.

Historically, the recommended student to psychologist ratio is 1,000 students for one full-time school psychologist. However, research exploring the prevalence of mental health issues affecting Australian children and adolescents, coupled with feedback from school psychologists themselves indicate that in practice, a much lower ratio would ensure a better service and reduced risk for students. Therefore, it is recommended that the student psychologist ratio should not exceed 500 students for one full-time psychologist.

## Provision of resources

In order to undertake their expected professional role, school psychologists need to be resourced appropriately with professional support and necessities. The educational organisation employing the school psychologist is responsible for providing appropriate resources, including the following:

- A private location in which to provide professional services to school populations, with a private waiting area for students who are waiting for their appointments.
- A sound-proof consulting room which is accessible by those who have disabilities and which provides adequate privacy, is comfortable and is suitable for group and individual counselling, assessment and consultation. This room should be a permanent location within the school, which is used for the same client at each session.
- A consulting room that is designed in such a way as to maximise the safety of the psychologist. In settings where aggressive, violent or emotionally disturbed students or families are to be treated, the office should be provided with two exits. An emergency alarm should also be available.
- A telephone with a voicemail system, computer and printer, facsimile machine access, tape recorder, lockable filing cabinets, stationery and office furniture, such as a bookcase, table to undertake assessments, coffee table and whiteboard.
- Access to all current psychological and educational testing materials required to fulfil the professional role as per the individual job description.
- A budgetary allowance per annum for accessing ongoing professional development needs such as supervision, professional development activities and professional resources (i.e., books, psychological intervention tools, journal subscriptions, and memberships).
- Administrative processes to enable approval of requests for leave and appropriate professional development activities.
- Adequate provision for travel to, and from, an external destination if required.

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*The information provided in this document is general and does not replace the need to obtain independent legal advice in specific situations.*

